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ABSTRACT

Educational reform efforts toward school restructuring are examined for their impact on the education of gifted and talented students. Considered first are implications of societal changes including changing demographics (e.g., increasing student diversity), changes in family structure and in interactions between school and family, and changes in the workplace (requiring a better educated work force). A vision is offered of a restructured school where all students are challenged according to individual abilities and learning styles. Such a vision is seen to require changing attitudes with many community organizations becoming new stakeholders, with student diversity being celebrated, with curriculum reform throughout impacting at-risk students (including gifted at-risk students), with increased family involvement, with gifted and talented students engaged in active learning experiences like community service, and with development of school business partnerships. A multipronged advocacy base is proposed for the restructured school. (Two references)

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School Restructuring: Impact on Attitudes, Advocacy, and Educational Opportunities for Gifted and Talented Students

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Introduction

During the past decade, a blizzard of papers and commission reports on the need for national educational reform have been written. The inadequacies of public education have been regularly documented, and experts daily debate alternative solutions in the print and electronic media. As part of this new wave of educational reform, schools in America are being asked to "restructure."

Restructuring has been defined as a fundamental and comprehensive transformation of the traditional school organization and of the roles and responsibilities of school personnel within that organization. Restructuring calls for systemic change in the way that schools design and deliver educational programs and services. School restructuring has come to include a series of common components: changes in school governance, shared decision making by school staff in determining the mission and organization of the school, new ways of developing curriculum, new approaches to scheduling, and greater involvement of parents and community.

Societal Changes

For those concerned about the education of gifted and talented students, school restructuring offers new challenges and new opportunities. Each component of school restructuring offers rich options to identify, develop, and hone the gifts and talents of students in powerful and expansive ways. To enable this to happen, advocates for gifted and talented programs must join in the common task of transforming schools in response to many complex societal changes, including changes in demographics, family structure, and the workplace.

Changing Demographics: Student Diversity

The face of our society is changing at an ever-increasing pace. As the year 2000 approaches, Americans are becoming more ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse. According to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, more than 600,000 people emigrate to this country annually. The changing face of Europe and Asia is bringing a new wave of immigrants to our shores. Demographic forecasts tell us that one in every three people in the United States will be a minority by the year 2020.

There are economic changes as well. In 1986, 4.5 million women were in the work force but living in poverty, and more than half had children. Further, one in five children in the country now lives in poverty. In response, schools are being challenged to increase their capacity to identify, develop, and hone the gifts and talents of children from diverse racial, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds.

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Changes in Family Structure and Interaction Between School and the Family

The majority of American women have now joined the work force and abandoned the role of full-time homemaker. In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the numbers of single-parent families. Many of these families lack an extended family support network. In more than half of two-parent families with school-age children, both parents work full time. Many communities are concerned about the growing numbers of latchkey

children. Despite these changes in family structures, there is no national policy on day care.

Distance from school also has become a factor that affects interaction between school personnel and families. Children live at greater distances from the schools they attend. In many parts of the country, both children and teachers must commute to school. Unlike the past, parents and teachers are less likely to see one another within the neighborhood.

Schools that are restructuring are working to establish new organizational responses to these changes. For example, some schools are extending the school day by instituting a wide range of early morning and after-school programs. In other schools, personnel are exploring new ways of reaching out to parents — holding meetings at the workplace and at community sites and arranging early morning, evening, and/or weekend conference times. All of these efforts offer ways to respond to the changing needs of families and to engage families in the nurturance, development, and expression of students' gifts and talents.

Changes in the Workplace

The American workplace has undergone rapid changes in the past two decades as it has moved from the needs of a low-tech operation to the demands of a high-tech setting. Business leaders say that today's work force needs more than just competency in the basic skills, it needs highly developed critical thinking, problem solving and collaborative skills.

Many schools have not kept pace with the changing demands of the workplace and cannot meet these needs. They continue to provide rote learning and assembly-line approaches to delivering curriculum. Staff and curriculum from programs for gifted and talented students have much to offer in meeting the needs of all students to enter the 21st Century workplace. Schools that are restructuring can provide opportunities for those educators who are experienced in gifted and talented programming. These educators can assume leadership roles because of their experience in the teaching of critical and creative thinking and problem-solving skills.

A Vision for Gifted and Talented Education in Restructured Schools

School restructuring begins by developing a shared vision — a new way of seeing the school organization approach its mission — a vision that is shared by staff, parents, and community. What might such a restructured school look like? What vision might be developed for such a school? Patty Bruce Mitchell (1990) said it well:

> *In the schools we seek, all children, from the less able to the most able, experience challenging work which engages and instructs so that children learn to use their minds well. All children from the less able to the most able move along at their own pace. Each feels that the adults around them expect success and will watch closely to ensure success. The rich curriculum provides a center for, not the boundaries of, instruction. Teachers assume that adaptations and extensions will be needed for all children, based upon their learning style, rate and level. Teachers have the capacity and resources to provide these adaptations and extensions....*
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> *In the schools we seek, highly able students and less able students do not compete for resources. Achieving success for all students is not equated with achieving the same results. Faculty and administrators understand that the differences in abilities among students vary widely. They work to bring the community into the education of all children but a special effort is made to draw the community toward students*

whose difference in ability require additional resources and support. Thus the community sees education of the most and least able as a challenge to be met, not as a problem which syphons off resources (p. 3).

Changing Attitudes: New Stakeholders

Historically, schools have been conservative, stable institutions that change extremely slowly and that embody traditional, time-tested values. Schools that are restructuring are willing to break with tradition and become risk takers by breaking new ground and reevaluating all aspects of school practice. Curriculum and pedagogy are being rethought in light of new research and demographic changes.

Several decades ago, society divided responsibilities between schools and families with certitude. The role of the schools was to teach, and the role of parents was to support schools in time-honored ways. Schools that are restructuring are willing to rethink these historical assumptions. They recognize that family support can no longer be assumed but must be cultivated and nurtured. These schools not only are reaching out to families but also are extending their outreach efforts to the broader community.

Social service organizations, museums, libraries, colleges and universities, and business and industry are becoming vital partners in the life and mission of the school. Taken together, there is new potential for greater understanding of student needs and renewed advocacy for the full development of students' gifts and talents.

Helping Students to Advocate and Celebrate Student Diversity

Every student receives a message about school, about how it feels to be in the school, and about how it feels to be one's self in the school setting. The ethos of the school is frequently referred to as school climate. Restructuring schools means paying attention to the school climate and having students see that the expression of their gifts and talents is welcomed and valued. Restructured schools are making conscious efforts to model and support the cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of their students through the composition of their staff and the nature and content of their curriculum.

School climate is concerned with human value — from the way people are treated in textbooks to the types of art work displayed in a school's halls or corridors. Respect, support, cooperation, and conflict resolution are all important aspects of school climate. Students become advocates for themselves and for the school as they contribute their gifts and talents to a wide range of learning experiences, including community service, mediation, and other types of school and community leadership projects.

Impacting Mainstream Curriculum Reform

Restructuring calls for particular emphasis on addressing the needs of at-risk students who are in danger of failing and becoming future dropouts. In general, society has not thought about gifted and talented students as part of the population of students at risk. Instead, these students have been perceived as being better at "doing school," at performing traditional school tasks.

Educators in programs for gifted and talented students know better. Many of these students have indeed been at risk; they have been unchallenged, unsupported, and unattended to. Special programs for gifted and talented students have frequently failed to address their needs. Frequently, students were offered a pullout program for two or three hours a week, but no curriculum modifications were made during the rest of the time.

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In schools that are restructuring, new opportunities exist to provide challenge, depth, and academic rigor. There is strong focus on the development of broad-based themes and interdisciplinary curricula, always stressed in programs for gifted and talented students. Students are being asked to link concepts across disciplines, to think on their feet, and to speak and write persuasively about things that are important to them. Students are able to choose from a large menu of options tailored to individual inclinations, talents, and abilities.

Schools that are restructuring are using systems of assessment that rely on exhibitions of mastery and portfolios of students' work over time. These schools are experimenting with schedules; longer periods and interdisciplinary courses are allowing students to pursue topics and interests in considerable depth. In addition to greater flexibility in the use of instructional time, varied grouping arrangements are being used to promote student interaction and achievement beyond conventional age-based groups. At these schools, teachers are guides, coaches, and mentors.

Advocacy Through Family Involvement

Research has confirmed what experience has always told us: Family involvement in their children's education is basic to the success of their children in school. Parents are the children's first teachers at home and continue to serve in a teaching capacity when the children enter school. Schools that welcome families not only will benefit from their support but also will be better able to understand and address the gifts and talents of the student population.

In many schools, family involvement now means a departure from traditional home-school activity. School personnel understand that there are diverse ways in which families can become involved in their children's education. If some parents are not going into the school, the school may need to go to the parents. Schools must be willing to experiment with new approaches that address family needs for flexible time frames, child care, and transportation. Schools may also need to adopt an expanded definition of their mission and collaborate with other community service providers in reaching out to parents whose circumstances prevent them from being as involved as they may want to be in their children's schooling.

Schools can build on relationships that families may have with community organizations and agencies, particularly families who are under-involved in the school. Partnerships with these community resources will help schools bring information to families in familiar and comfortable settings. These interactions will also demonstrate the school's respect for families and their cultures, its understanding of barriers that limit parental involvement in school, and its desire to address family needs and concerns. School personnel can build advocacy for gifted students by consciously focusing on new approaches to family involvement.

Building Community Advocacy Through Community Service

Schools that are restructuring are making serious efforts to engage gifted and talented students in active learning experiences. Through such projects, students gain new insights about how they want to relate to others and to themselves. They become empowered to use their gifts and talents and learn a great deal about becoming socially responsible adults.

School personnel are engaging students by highlighting real life needs. Students can apply and develop their gifts and talents by working on a range of community concerns from issues related to the elderly and day care to environmental problems, such as waste management and recycling. Service learning helps students to understand the relevance of their course

work and, further, to test their learning against the reality of the world around them. Educators of gifted and talented students know that there are few better ways to inspire a student's interest than by allowing the student to analyze a real-life problem.

However, service learning is more than exposing students to complex problems that demand complex solutions. Students are able to assume leadership positions in which they learn important skills of working on a project and seeing it through to completion. Ultimately, the experience prepares these students to become educated and confident citizens. Once exposed to the needs of the community and challenged by the responsibility of helping others, young people increase their sense of community involvement. In response, community members become advocates for these students. There is enhanced recognition of the importance these gifted students have to the future welfare of their neighborhood, their community, and the world.

Building Advocates Through Business Partnerships

A number of schools have formed significant new relationships — school-business partnerships. Many of these school-business partnerships are benefiting from the shared information on the realities and needs of the workplace, which is integrated into the students' course work. In addition, some schools are becoming adept at integrating technological advances into their learning environment and providing students with experiences in businesses and other community settings that make curriculum relevant and compelling. Partnerships with businesses are helping schools to restructure by supporting the upgrading of curriculum; encouraging research and development in curriculum revision; and helping to develop flexible, participatory learning opportunities that capture and maintain the students' interest in learning.

Most business people know that organizations cannot change easily without outside support. In schools that are restructuring, business leaders are often providing that support. They are having dialogue with school leaders and helping them to restructure through assistance with strategic planning, systemwide analysis, and deployment of resources. Among other outcomes, these efforts enable business leaders to appreciate the importance of serving as mentors for gifted and talented students. Specifically, business leaders are working to:

- Implement systemwide self-assessment, which can become the basis for strategic planning and partnership goals. This self-assessment is an excellent starting point for partnerships that can ultimately lead to advocacy.
- Help schools to develop a vision and an operational definition of the school's mission. Such a mission statement provides the foundation on which schools set their own policies, programs, and practices.

Through partnerships with schools at the local level, businesses are addressing the development of gifted and talented students by:

- Establishing business site internships for administrators, teachers, and students, which expose them to industry needs and expectations for the 21st Century
- Assisting in the introduction of performance-based assessment that rewards and motivates competence, initiative, and creativity for staff and students alike

The National Alliance for Business (NAB) reports that "not only students but also teachers, principals, area administrators and the superintendent need to be held accountable" (NAB, 1989, p. 5). Schools have traditionally measured student performance through grades and test scores, but richer and more varied measures of student performance are needed. Increasingly, business leaders and others are asking for samples of students' work; they are asking to see portfolios and demonstrations of mastery that will show what students have learned and accomplished. Gifted and talented students are flourishing with this approach to assessment because it supports in-depth understanding of subjects and concepts. In turn, businesses become advocates for the needs of gifted students and become supporters of school programs and practices that set high standards of excellence.

Summary

In summary, to achieve desired outcomes for gifted and talented students, the goals for all students within restructured schools must be called to mind. Parents, school personnel, and community leaders must wrestle with the following essential questions:

- What should all students know and be able to do as a result of their educational experiences?
- How are student growth and progress assessed in meaningful ways?
- What are the school's unique responsibilities in serving students who are gifted and talented?
- What are the shared responsibilities of the families, the school district, and the community-at-large in meeting the needs of these students?

Schools that restructure are creating a sense of shared responsibility among all the stakeholders. They are experimenting with new ways to respond to the changing structure of families and to the changing demands of the 21st Century workplace. They are developing approaches that identify and serve gifted and talented students from diverse backgrounds and diverse socioeconomic, ethnic, and racial groups. These schools are forming creative school-business partnerships to address issues of content, curriculum, and accountability for students and teachers. They are developing a multipronged advocacy base that will ultimately enhance the structure, learning experiences, and expectations for all teachers and students in a restructured school.

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